

Comic-Con: Syfy's 'Van Helsing' Gives the Classic Vampire Tale a Gender-Bending Twist

JULY 21, 2016 6:15pm PT by Dave Nemetz



Courtesy of Syfy

The new series stars "True Blood's" Kelly Overton as a female version of the famed vampire slayer.

First, women took over the ghost-busting industry; now they're staking a claim to the vampire-hunting business, too.

Syfy's new series *Van Helsing* (premiering Sept. 23) puts a feminine twist on Dracula's age-old adversary: *True Blood*'s Kelly Overton stars as Vanessa Helsing (see what they did there?), a butt-kicking cross between Buffy and *The Walking Dead*'s Michonne who's specially equipped to battle bloodsuckers in a post-apocalyptic world overrun by vamps. Not only does her blood composition make her immune to vampires, but she also has the ability to turn vampires into humans by biting them. (Hugh Jackman starred in the big-screen version.)

Overton joined fellow cast members Jonathan Scarfe (Axel) and Christopher Heyerdahl (Sam), along with showrunner Neil LaBute (via phone from Germany) and executive producers Simon Barry (*Continuum*), Chad Oakes and Mike Frislev for a Thursday panel at San Diego Comic-Con, unveiling the first footage from the Syfy series and previewing what viewers can expect to see when *Helsing* debuts in the fall.

The action-packed first-look trailer (we'll add video when it's available) promises lots of *Walking Dead*-esque blood, gore and gunfire. In front of a sepia-toned backdrop of bombed-out buildings and ominous clouds, Vanessa kicks, punches and stabs her way through a horde of fang-baring foes. And the vampires here are definitely not the sexy *Twilight* kind; in fact, they closely resemble *TWD*'s walkers, so it's clear what audience this *Van Helsing* is gunning for.

So why turn Van Helsing into a woman? LaBute says that decision was made “very early on” in the development process: Vanessa, he says, is “a long-past relative of the original professor from the Dracula myth, brought up to date in ... a dystopian world.” Through the course of the first season, LaBute hints, Vanessa will “very slowly learn who she is, and not only how to stay alive, but bring the world back from disaster.”

In another scene screened for the Comic-Con crowd, a pack of vampires learn all about Vanessa’s special powers when one of them tries to feed on her while she’s sleeping ... and ends up vomiting up her blood in disgust. Vanessa wakes up and takes them out one-by-one, slashing throats and beating one poor vamp to a bloody pulp.

Overton says her physical preparation for the role involved boxing and mixed martial arts, which she had already done for years: “I just kept that up and bulked up the weights, to get as strong as I could.” And when asked what her biggest inspiration was for the role, she got cheers from the crowd for name-checking Sigourney Weaver in *Aliens*: “I went back to Ripley for this.”

But Ripley didn’t bite any aliens, did she? Vanessa’s ability to bring vampires back from the undead by sinking her own teeth into them is a real innovation in the genre, and Overton says that’s one of the details that made her want to play this role. She adds that there are “tons of twists and surprises in store,” hinting at fresh revelations about the Van Helsing lineage and “what makes her who she is.”

Plus, the show delves deep into vampire minutiae, Barry promises, exploring “the viral nature of vampirism, and the scientific basis on which vampirism could work.” A few more unique wrinkles: *Helsing*’s vampires do age (they’re not immortal), and when they’re turned human by Vanessa, they retain memories from when they were vampires. The result is a series that borrows from classic vampire stories while blazing its own path; as Barry puts it, “We stole all the best parts [of the genre], and we left out all the stuff we didn’t like.”

And fans will get an early chance to see all that blood-sucking carnage: Syfy will air a preview of the *Van Helsing* pilot, commercial-free, on July 31 at 10 p.m., following the premiere of *Sharknado 4*.